Throughout the world, social and economic change has led to the displacement of millions of people who seek refuge away from their homelands. Such displacement may be voluntary, where a family will determine that their native soil no longer provides the necessary means for subsistence, i.e. work, food, education for the children, and moves on to a place with better economic opportunities. But migration may also be forced. There are many cases around the world where countries are being torn by internal armed conflict and external wars that threaten communal way of living. When this is the case, people are forced to leave their homes to any place that can provide relative peace and safety. Regardless of the motives for relocation, people who have been displaced and seek asylum away from their homes carry their social upbringing with them along with hopes and dreams of a better tomorrow. Refugees’ socialization into a familial unit, a political group, a community is transplanted from whence they came to where they are. Gender is no different.

The book *Not Born a Refugee Woman* is a compilation of academic works that describe and analyze the experiences of women who have been forced to leave their homes in search of refuge. *Not Born a Refugee Woman* is a collection of essays based on studies conducted by several academics from different fields ranging from sociologist to poets. It was edited by Moroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou, and Helene Moussa, all of whom have provided extensive prior work regarding refugee policy. Additionally, it was published in 2008, which plays an important role in noting the shift in international policy relating to refugees after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The editors are Canadian scholars, and thus, much of the
research comes from Canadian refugee studies, policy and subjects. But, the authors explain that Canada aligned itself with the United States in the war against terrorism, and changed its refugee and asylum policies accordingly.

The book categorizes the essays into four sections. The first is about the identity of refugee women; the construction of this identity in accordance to the gender roles of their native lands, and the re-building of this identity in their new host country. The second part of the book is a description of different methodologies used to gather the required data. These essays relate to how the researchers engaged the subjects of these studies, but highlight the importance of the stories told through the interviewing method. For example, one essay is partly written by a poet who was an active participant in the interviews performed by her partner, a journalist, who broke through the restraints posed by research stating that the “lessons learned came from the site itself, from the people [they] met, from the history and the geography that were theirs.” 158. The third section is devoted to explain how refugee women cope displacement. Two of the essays describe how refugee women have sought help to improve their mental health after the trauma of their experience. Another explores the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of displaced women. Some of the strategies worked, but some need to be adapted to consider women’s gendered identity. The final section includes essays which answer how policies developed to protect refugee seldom do not serve the purpose of protecting refugee women since these policies are based in the gender roles of their old lands.

Among the many essays which comprise this volume, the recurrent theme is the identity of refugee women. The authors sought to explain how the identity of a refugee woman develops and to what extent women’s identity as refugees is dependent upon the gender roles previously ingrained in refugee women’s psyche by socialization. By using a feminist analysis of these
gender roles, the authors wanted to gain insight into how these acquired traits affect women’s lives in their new home countries. Furthermore, using the feminist analysis approach, the essays at the conclusion of the book explore how to implement this knowledge to improve governmental policies that affect women refugees in particular and not merely as a derivative of policies affecting refugee men.

Taking into account the recurring theme of refugee women’s identity construction, the title of the book fits the topic like Cinderella’s glass slipper. The authors identify women refugees as mothers, sisters, daughters who assume their role as homemakers given to them by their communal society in their native lands. For example, one of the essays is about the gendered notion of how non-governmental organizations provided humanitarian aid to women in Sri Lanka who were displaced within their own country. One humanitarian program provided Sri Lankan refugees with the necessary training to develop their own business. Only three women graduated from the metal welding course, but because the prevailing view in Eastern Sri Lanka is that unmarried Muslim women are normally not allowed to work outside the family home, these three women were encouraged to set up their shops in their own homes to fit this gendered mold. Even though advances are being made in breaking through this gendered approach, the women internalized the home as their boundary and are exceptionally tentative to cross it.

Making matters worse, humanitarian organizations are also tentative of crossing the gender limits. Men resent women who break the long established gender pattern, which may in turn exacerbate gender inequality. Due to the existence of these gender roles, the experience of a refugee woman is unique and cannot be lumped with that of a man. The authors note the importance of this distinction and using it in developing policies that best fit those experiences
and protect women from the different dangers women face upon relocation. 221. Although there are instances where the authors compare refugee women’s experience to male refugees’ experience, the book maintains its focus on women refugees’ perception of themselves, and does not stray from this theme.

This narrowly focused approach, however, may be problematic because sometimes the issues confronted by refugee women seem common to those of other immigrant. For example, one of the essays discusses refugee women’s difficulty in adapting to a different culture. The author lists language as a major barrier refugee women have to confront in their new host country. This language barrier imposes difficulties in finding a job, locating a school for their children, accessing health care, or describing health symptoms. 208. But this is not unique to refugee women. All immigrants face the problem of assimilating to a new culture. Any person, male or female, who has migrated to a foreign land must struggle with learning a new language. Additionally, the authors of this particular essay note the difficulties in assimilating culturally to the new country. The authors state that for women refugees their past “continuously threads its way into their present, permeates it, and affects it. Their mental well being is intimately connected with gendered identity, and both are influenced by their historical context, their culture, and their human environment.” 211. However, the authors could have developed this dichotomy further, specifically citing how a woman refugee’s past creates a different assimilation process that that of any other immigrant. From the text, it appears the authors overlook the fact that assimilation, in every aspect of the word, is a common problem for non-refugee immigrants as well.

Several of the essays draw on sociological studies to develop independent theses which can be daunting to a reader who is not familiar with the technical terminology. For example,
several essays mention the concept of dialogical feminist perspective. This term refers to the construction of the self and its development through “a process of interlocution shaped by the different and sometimes conflicting voices or worldviews it encounters.” However, the concept remains theoretical in that the authors do not show how it applies to the lives of the women they studied. The author of the essay *Dialogical Approach to Identity* uses the dialogical perspective to explain how it has affected policy and provides the United Nations’ guidelines as an example. This approach lacks the human element; the individualism necessary for the readers to relate to the women’s stories.

In contrast, the book reaches its most gripping part when it tells the stories to exemplify the identity conflict of refugee women. The essay *Always ‘Natasha’* began with a heart-wrenching narrative of a nineteen year old woman, named Marika, who was a victim of the sex-trafficking industry. She was torn from her native Ukraine and dumped in an apartment in Tel Aviv with four other women who were “purchased.” All of these women were forced to have sex with men from all walks of life, who due to the women’s Eastern European background, nicknamed each of them Natasha. Marika accepted this nickname as part of her new identity and used it as a shield. Natasha was the cold dead prostitute. Marika was her spirit of salvation. Several essays based their conclusions on case studies of refugee women, choosing instead a more theoretical approach. Only a few of them engaged the readers in learning about the women’s lives. This violates the dialogical approach to the research. Much could be learned from the women’s stories of plight which could be used as a powerful tool to the development of policies that account for the different experiences based on gender roles.

One of the essays in particular seemed to reach the intricate balance of engaging the reader in the subject’s story. Written by Pamela Sugiman, *Days to Remember* tells the story of
the author’s mother and her struggles as a displaced Japanese-Canadian woman during World War II. The story explores the gender roles instilled in Issei women within the context of her story, highlighting her mother’s fundamental role in their family. Moreover, it describes her mother during this trying time of internment as stoic and courageous, and Sugiman credits her mother with ensuring that her children did not suffer. This essay also serves as a prime illustration of how the division of labor among men and women prior to the war “ensured that women and men experienced hardship in distinct ways…while many husband, fathers, brothers, and boyfriends were incarcerated as prisoners of war in Ontario or forced to perform exhausting labor in road camps or lumber camps, women withstood their own hardship in the feminized sites of internment.” 118. The essay becomes a first-hand narrative of the book’s premise.

The book contributes to the scholarly understanding of refugee women, but does not aid a non-academic reader in understanding the real impact of gender roles in a refugee woman’s life. It stressed the importance of overturning the patriarchal gender roles that plague policies regarding refugees, and recognized that there is a difference between the male view of their refugee status and women’s perception of the same. The book advocates for new policies specifically tailored for the refugee woman’s experience. However, the collection of essays focused its attention more on the researchers than the researched. Albeit there were exceptions, like the Sugiman piece, the essays reported the perception of the authors while the stories of the subjects remained in the backdrop of the scholarly work.

The editors of the book were looking to answer certain questions regarding a refugee women’s construction of their identity. Additionally, they sought to use this new found knowledge to propose new directions in policies that affect refugee women but cling to the old gender stereotypes and assumptions. The book accomplished its goal in raising awareness that a
woman refugee has a different experience than that of a man refugee because of the pre-existing gender expectations, but it did not make a lasting impression on how this distinction affects the lives of refugee women. It could have used the testimony obtained in the studies conducted to paint a clearer picture of the struggles of refugee women in their old homes and in their new homes.

This is not to say that I do not agree with the premise of the book. Asylum policies protecting refugees are gender biased, tailored to fit the male experience of displacement and hardship. These laws are in need of an overhaul that carefully considers women refugees as their own group in need of protection. Men have been guilty of monstrosities against women which have forced women to relocate in fear of being tortured, raped, or even killed. Most recently, for example, the Taliban regime in the Swat region of Pakistan has forbidden schools to educate girls and threatened with death any person who violated this edict. This forced thousands of Pakistani families to flee from the only land they knew as home. Thus, it is imperative that asylum laws be adapted to help women that, as a result of their own patriarchal society, have been treated as second-class citizens.

Yet, it is also important to recognize that it is difficult to divest a person of the traits that have been embedded into his or her self through socialization. Gender roles are in this category. Therefore, the change in policies must account for the different experiences between refugee men and women, but cannot be forced upon refugee women. Their traumatic experiences beg for a piece of familiarity and comfort rather than drastic change and assimilation to new cultural norms. A comprehensive policy that helps women and their own unique perception of gender is crucial to a woman letting go of the label of refugee and embrace gender equality as the norm.